



"LET JUSTICE ROLL LIKE A RIVER..."

Racial Justice and the 2020 Election

BY CHRIS KELLERMAN, S.J.

The upcoming election on November 3 could lead to dramatic shifts in the fight for racial justice in the United States. Our newly elected local, state, and national officials must address the presence and effects of systemic racism in the United States. The following are a few of the racial justice policy areas where we need to hold our elected officials accountable.

Housing

A highly significant reason for the wealth gap between white Americans and Black and Brown Americans is systemic racism in housing. Largely due to the U.S. government's support of racial segregation in the mid-20th century, Black and Brown Americans disproportionately live in areas of high poverty. A 2017 study showed that 27 percent of Native Americans, 26 percent of Black people, and 22 percent of Latinx people lived in high-poverty areas, versus only 5 percent of white people.¹ Living in a high-poverty area impacts access to strong schools, adequate health care, better jobs, and good grocery stores. Black and Brown Americans are disproportionately exposed to air pollution as well,² and there is evidence to suggest that exposure to pollution increases a person's chance of dying from COVID-19.³

There is also a gap in homeownership rates among racial groups. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that while white homeownership is at 76 percent, Black homeownership is at 47 percent, and Latinx homeownership is at 51.4 percent.⁴ Since homeownership allows a family to build equity and accrue greater wealth over time, such a disparity is a particularly significant factor in the racial wealth gap.

Policy initiatives that could help:

- Reinstate the Obama Administration's 2015 Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing regulation that was designed to help end housing discrimination.
- Fully fund the Housing Choice Voucher Program so all low-income families can find safe and affordable housing.
- Outlaw source-of-income discrimination against renters who need government assistance to pay for their rent.
- End exclusionary zoning, which pushes low-income people into concentrated areas.
- Expand funding for fair-housing testers throughout the United States to end discriminatory practices.

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Voting Rights

Especially in view of the flagrant and open attempts of the Trump Administration to suppress mail-in voting turnout during the midst of a pandemic, our elected officials need to address the issues surrounding voting rights. The governments of Texas, Alabama, and Mississippi, for example, have imposed more restrictive voter identification laws in the past decade. These laws often place tremendous burden on those in poverty due to the cost involved in obtaining an approved ID.⁵ States like Florida and Alabama require people with past felony convictions to pay all their fines before voting, and in Mississippi some people have been permanently barred from voting—even if they fully served their sentences.⁶

In order to ensure all Americans are able to exercise their right to vote, our governments could enact the following policies:

- Pass the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act to ensure states are upholding the rights of voters.
- Implement a policy that all Americans automatically become registered voters when turning 18.
- Restore full voting rights to those who have been incarcerated, past or present.
- End partisan-based gerrymandering that splits districts comprised of Black and Brown people to reduce their political power.
- Provide for mail-in balloting throughout the country.

Policing

Since the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers on May 25, an increasing number of white Americans are finally beginning to take seriously the calls of Black Americans for the radical reform of our systems of community safety. Advocates for reform have made it clear that police militarization and violence have a negative impact on all of our communities, but with a disproportionate impact on Black and Brown people. The police in the United States regularly kill over 1,000 people per year. Black people are nearly three times more likely than white people to be killed by a police officer, and Black people are more likely to be unarmed than whites when killed by a police officer. And remarkably, in 99 percent of police-involved killings from 2013 to 2019, no officers have been charged with a crime.⁷

Advocacy recommendations vary on the level of reform needed for community safety, ranging anywhere from banning certain policing practices to abolishing the police altogether. Here are a few policies that could help to end police violence:

- End no-knock raids and enforce body-cam requirements.
- End the practice of qualified immunity that protects police officers from prosecution.
- Require the intervention of other officers when excessive force is observed.
- Forbid police departments from purchasing military equipment.

- Divert some of the funding of police departments toward community-led safety programs as well as mental health and addiction response teams.

Incarceration

Despite recent improvements, mass incarceration is still a serious problem. In 2015, the United States comprised less than 5 percent of the population of the world but 25 percent of the world's incarcerated persons.⁸ The Gulf South states have some of the highest incarceration rates in the nation.⁹

Racial disparities are strikingly present in incarceration rates as well. In 2017 Latino males were three times more likely to be incarcerated than white males, and Black males were almost six times more likely to be incarcerated than white males. Black and Latina women were more likely to be incarcerated than white women as well.¹⁰ Unjust sentencing laws, often based in racist post-Reconstruction legislation, force long prison sentences on people or keep people permanently under the control of the criminal justice system. In August, for example, the Louisiana Supreme Court denied Fair Wayne Bryant's request to reduce his prison sentence. Due to Louisiana's habitual offender laws, Bryant, a Black man, was sentenced in 1997 to life in prison for the theft of a pair of hedge clippers.¹¹

States could help reduce these injustices by:

- End “three strikes, you're out” habitual offender laws and mandatory minimum sentencing laws that take power away from the courts.
- Prohibit cash bail, a policy which keeps poor people who haven't been convicted of a crime in jail.
- Stop imprisonment for small and nonviolent drug crimes.
- End “life without parole” sentencing.
- Implement and empower independent Conviction Integrity Units that can monitor prosecutorial offices across the country.

These are not the only issues related to race, of course. There is no doubt that the post-election discussions about racial justice will include questions about education, employment, reparations to Black and Native Americans, and reducing hate acts throughout the country. Whether any of these policies are put into law, however, will depend largely upon whom we vote into office. As the prophet Amos proclaimed, “Let justice roll like a river...” (Amos 5:24).

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Catholic Social Thought and Hope

In times such as these, when we are battered by the multiple forces of the coronavirus pandemic, massive economic dislocation, widespread outrage over racist police brutality, and foreign and domestic efforts to undermine democratic institutions—even the right to vote—it is easy to lose sight of what we desire for society and how to get there. It is easy to lose hope.

So, as we work to make social, racial, immigration, and environmental justice central to this election cycle and contemplate, perhaps with trepidation, life and work for justice after the election, we would do well to reflect on a message of hope from Pope Francis. In one part of his recent address in Rome to Jesuits and colleagues working worldwide for social and ecological justice, Francis urged the participants to *open paths to hope*:¹

Our world needs transformations that protect life under threat and defend the weakest. We seek changes and many times we do not know what they should be, or we do not feel able to deal with them; they are beyond us.

At the borders of exclusion we run the risk of despair if we follow human logic alone. It is surprising that so often the victims of this world do not allow themselves to be overcome by the temptation to give in; rather, they trust and cling to hope.

We are all witnesses to the fact that “the lowly, the exploited, the poor and underprivileged” can and do achieve a lot... When the poor organize themselves they become genuine “social poets: creators of work, builders of housing, producers of food, above all for people left behind by the world market.”²

Does the social apostolate exist to solve problems? Yes, but above all to promote processes and to encourage hope. Processes that help people and communities to grow that lead to awareness of their rights, to deploy their skills and to create their own future.

May you work for “true Christian hope, which seeks the eschatological kingdom, [and which] always generates history.”³ Share your hope wherever you are, to encourage, console, comfort and revive. Please open the future, or, to use the expression of a current scholar, frequent the future.

Open the future, inspire possibilities, generate alternatives, help to think and act differently. Take care of your daily relationship with the risen and glorious Christ, and be workers of charity and sowers of hope. May you walk, singing and weeping, so that the struggles and concerns for the lives of the least and for threatened creation may not take away from you the joy of hope.⁴

It is with this divine gift of hope that we can continue to work without despair to transform our cities, states, country, and this battered world, even against the well-armed forces of exclusion and oppression. We speak of faith, hope, and love, but often ignore the transformative power of hope which Jesus described as planting seeds from which harvests can grow and people everywhere can find food for their bodies, minds, and spirits. As Pope Francis put it, we must learn from the least among us to “trust and cling to hope.”

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THIS ELECTION HAS CONSEQUENCES

Contrasting Party Positions on Key Policy Issues

BY DENNIS KALOB, PH.D.

Elections have consequences, the saying goes. Indeed, that is very true. Sometimes the consequences are not substantial, and then there are times like these when the election would appear to have very significant consequences for our nation and world.

In this article, I summarize the positions of the two major political parties on a few key issues, although, strangely, there is no 2020 Republican Party platform and they are relying on the one from 2016.¹ I focus on issues related to the environment, health care, labor, voting rights, and help for those in need—issues that we in JSRI have addressed over the years and about which we care deeply.

Climate Change

Certainly we need to take dramatic action to address climate change and the existential threat it poses to virtually all of Creation, which Pope Francis wrote about persuasively in *Laudato Si'*, his 2015 encyclical on the environment. Yet, the GOP is unmoved by the scientific evidence and international consensus. The Trump administration has withdrawn the U.S. from the Paris Climate Agreement leaving us virtually alone in the world.²

The Democrats, on the other hand, would bring us back into the Paris Agreement; and they pledge to take significant action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Their platform, however, falls short of endorsing a Green New Deal.³

Health Care

The Republican platform continues to call for the repeal of the Affordable Care Act (ACA). The Trump administration is currently arguing before the U.S. Supreme Court that the law should be declared unconstitutional. If successful, this case would likely cause 20 million people to lose their insurance. As for Republican plans for a replacement, there is great uncertainty. Various ideas have been proposed, such as giving states block grants to fund health care for low income people. Their most recent platform position on Medicaid, overall, supports “block-granting the program without strings.”⁴

The Democratic platform expresses support for protecting and expanding the ACA and that health care is a right. They support the creation of a public option in the health insurance exchanges and lowering of the eligibility age for Medicare to 60. The platform does stop short of promising to pursue Medicare for All.⁵

Minimum Wage

The last time the federal minimum wage was increased was July 2009, over 11 years ago. If the minimum wage had kept up with inflation since 1968, the year the value of the wage peaked, the current minimum wage would be over \$12 per hour.⁶

The Republican Party has become quite adamant against increases. Many would just as soon eliminate the requirement of a minimum wage altogether, as they see it as an intrusion into the free market. The platform has them on record as opposing federal increases and stating that they would leave it up to the individual states and local communities.⁷

Indeed, most of the states have taken their own action on the minimum wage. There are now 29 states, plus the District of Columbia, that have instituted higher minimum wages (Virginia is set to become the 30th state in 2021). In fact, 18 states and D.C. have minimum wages of \$10 or more.⁸ Republican-controlled states are the most resistant to increases, and many preempt cities from raising local minimums.

Of the five Gulf South states, only Florida has a minimum wage above \$7.25 (currently \$8.56).⁹

The Democratic Party platform calls for phasing in a national \$15 minimum wage.¹⁰

Voting Rights

The Democratic Party supports restoring/strengthening the Voting Rights Act, which had been watered down by the Supreme Court. They also note in their platform many additional ways they would make voting more accessible and easier, such as expanding mail-in and early voting and allowing same-day registration. They also favor making Election Day a national holiday.¹¹

The Republican Party appears uninterested in pursuing any of the above. Rather, they have been engaging in efforts to suppress voter turnout. Donald Trump even publicly admitted that he would like to keep the United States Postal Service underfunded so it would be incapable of adequately handling the expected deluge of absentee ballots this fall, thereby casting doubt over the election results.¹²

COVID-19 Response—HEROES Act and HEALS Act

The HEROES Act was passed by the Democratic House of Representatives in May. It included a 15% increase in the maximum SNAP (formerly known as Food Stamps) monthly benefit, something Democrats have recognized as particularly important in this time of mass unemployment and increased poverty and hunger. The HEROES Act also includes a continuation of the emergency \$600 federal benefit added to weekly state unemployment payments, another round of stimulus checks, and aid to state and local governments.¹³

The Republicans' earlier support for emergency assistance ground to a halt in face of the HEROES Act—the Republican-

controlled Senate has refused to take it up. At the time of this writing, they were offering the HEALS Act, a much smaller bill, which they have yet to vote on. The HEALS Act would provide no additional SNAP benefit¹⁴ and only a much diminished weekly federal unemployment benefit.¹⁵ It also provides virtually no assistance to state and local governments.¹⁶

The differences in responses to our current crisis fit the overall ideologies of the two parties. Republicans have been reluctant to spend resources on programs addressing the needs of our nation's most vulnerable. They support limited government. Or as Ronald Reagan said at his inaugural address in 1981, "Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem."¹⁷ Democrats, on the other hand, are clearly in favor of federal action to address human needs.

Conclusion

Platform positions and the public policies that spring from them are not just exercises in civics, but are essentially expressions of our morality. The Church demands of us to work for the common good and to hear "the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor."¹⁸ Policies that promote the common good or address the needs of a suffering planet or those at the margins of society are moral policies that we are called to support. Policies that put profits or narrow private interests ahead of the common good or that ignore or harm the earth or the poor are immoral and must be opposed.

For more information on Catholic social teaching and public policy, check out NETWORK, the Catholic social justice lobby. This group of women religious has been a force for justice in this country for nearly 50 years. Their *2020 Election Toolkit* (networkadvocates.org/2020election) may be helpful as you discern the political and moral options in this year's elections.

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WHICH WAY FORWARD?

Immigration and the 2020 Election

BY SUE WEISHAR, PH.D.

During his 2016 campaign for president, Donald Trump made restricting immigration central to his political strategy. Many pundits believe that his nativist agenda clinched the election for him in battleground states.¹ Although his absurd boast that he was going to build a wall along the entirety of the southern border and “make Mexico pay for it” is nowhere near being realized (only three new miles of border wall have been built since his inauguration, funded entirely by U.S. taxpayers),² perhaps no sector of government policy has been more impacted during the Trump Administration than immigration. Sweeping changes have occurred despite the fact that no major immigration law has been passed by Congress. Through Executive Orders and the federal rule-changing process, policies affecting family-based visas, refugee admissions, asylum eligibility, Dreamers, and deportation priorities have profoundly altered who is eligible to pursue the American Dream.³

How the Trump Administration has implemented anti-immigrant policies at times has been breathtaking in its cruelty and recklessness. Just seven days into office the American people got a bitter taste of just how far outside the norms of presidential governance Donald Trump was willing to go when a travel ban limiting individuals from seven majority-Muslim countries from entering the U.S. and suspending the Refugee Admissions Program for 120 days was issued without even consulting Justice Department or Department of Homeland Security officials.⁴ On May 7, 2017, Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced that

Obama-era deportation policies prioritizing persons with criminal records were being abandoned. Instead, any undocumented immigrant, regardless of length of time in the U.S. or U.S. citizen family ties, was “fair game” for ICE officers,⁵ resulting in a surge of deportations and devastating heartbreak and hardship for immigrants and their family members left behind.⁶

Even the president’s most loyal supporters had a hard time defending the Trump Administration’s “Zero Tolerance” policy in the spring of 2018 that led to the traumatic separation at the border of over 2,600 children from their parents. As of October 2018, 120 children seeking to rejoin parents had still not been reunited, according to a report by the ACLU.⁷ Young immigrant Dreamers’ hopes to continue working and thriving in the U.S. without the constant threat of deportation were upended when the Trump Administration moved to end DACA in September 2017. Trump’s so-called Migrant Protection Protocols instituted in January 2019 and his Administration’s March 2020 COVID restrictions have resulted in over 30,000 asylum seekers living in limbo in often dangerous situations in northern Mexico.⁸ The Catholic Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC) warns that the proposed rule changes to asylum policy issued in June will effectively end the right of individuals fleeing persecution to obtain asylum in the United States.⁹

Given all this, I do not think it is hyperbolic to suggest that the 2020 presidential election will be the most momentous

election in our nation's history in regards to immigration. Will we continue down the path of fear and exclusion of immigrants the Trump Administration has blazed? Or will we recommit to being a nation that respects the human dignity of migrants and acknowledges the vast contributions to American life made by immigrants, which the Biden campaign appears to endorse in its immigration platform?¹⁰

PRIORITIES FOR IMMIGRATION LEGISLATION IN 2021

Even if Donald Trump should lose the presidency this November, major immigration reform legislation may not pass in the new Congress. Our nation's immigration system is enormously complex. In 2006, 2007, and 2013, Congress attempted to pass comprehensive immigration reform legislation that sought to satisfy a vast array of their constituencies' priorities, including progressives' commitment to legalizing the status of undocumented immigrants, conservatives' demands for enhanced border enforcement, industry requests for more workers, and organized labor's concerns to avoid worker exploitation. Because these efforts to pass a comprehensive immigration bill failed, even with the support of Presidents George W. Bush and then Barack Obama, some legislators began calling for a "piecemeal" approach to immigration reform where issues are tackled one bill at a time.

I asked three immigration policy experts what immigration reform issues should be addressed first by the 117th Congress in 2021 if President Trump is defeated and comprehensive immigration reform legislation does not appear possible.

Jose Arnulfo Cabrera, Director of Education and Advocacy for Migration at the Ignatian Solidarity Network, wants to see legislation enacted like the American Dream and Promise Act, passed by the U.S. House in June 2019, that provides a pathway to citizenship for Dreamers, Temporary Protected Status (TPS) holders, and individuals with Deferred Enforced Departure (DED).¹¹

Mary Townsend, Executive Director of El Pueblo in Mississippi, noted that, with broad public support for Dreamers and their work on the frontlines of the pandemic as medical workers, "there is simply no good reason" not to pass legislation for Dreamers. She also wants to see a fix to a provision of a 1996 law that requires undocumented spouses of U.S. citizens to wait up to ten years in their home countries before receiving legal status.¹²

Caitlin-Marie Ward, Senior Advisor on Migration at the Jesuit Office of Justice and Ecology, thinks Congress should prioritize legislation like the Refugee Protection Act, proposed in 2019, which would protect society's most vulnerable—asylum seekers and refugees. This bill requires the President to set an annual refugee admissions goal of at least 95,000 refugees, expand access to counsel for all detained immigrants, and establish a program to admit certain refugees from Northern Triangle countries (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador).¹³

CONCLUSION

These are dark and frightening days for vulnerable immigrants, but Bishop Mark J. Seitz of the Diocese of El Paso reminds us in a July op-ed to keep faith in a better future:

"... Faith and hope tell us that the machinery of darkness our immigration enforcement has become is not permanent. Faith teaches us that there will be a day when all of this pain will be no more, when walls of hatred come tumbling down, and when grace transforms the dark present into something better. This darkness is ours to undo. Let's get to work..."¹⁴

Regardless of the election's outcomes, JSRI will "get to work" with our immigrant sisters and brothers and justice allies to build a more humane and just immigration system.

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6363 St. Charles Avenue, Box 94
New Orleans, LA 70118-6143

(504) 864-7746
jsri@loyno.edu
www.loyno.edu/jsri

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